With Faces Shining
January 8, 2012

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 72:1–7
Isaiah 60:1–6
Matthew 2:1–12

"They left for their own country by another road."
Matthew 2:12 (NRSV)

There is a time to lay down one's cares and duties and run to Bethlehem and the manger, a time to follow the star. . . . There is also a time to return, to begin where we left off. . . . We have seen God and survived to tell the tale, moving about not knowing that our faces shine with the encounter, bearing the mark of the encounter forever, and marveling in the darkest night of the soul at that wondrous star-filled night.

Peter Gomes
Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living

"Watcha doing, Grandaddy?" eleven-year-old Eleanor asked one morning last week. I'm not sure why, but Eleanor seems genuinely interested in what I'm doing.

"I'm working on next Sunday's sermon," I answered.

"How many more do you have to do?" she asked.

"Just four more," I responded.

"Well, I guess you better make them good," she declared and then left me to ponder that.

Four more Sundays, and this morning I'm thinking about baptism. One of the pastoral duties of a Presbyterian minister is the proper celebration of the Sacraments, the Lord's Supper and Baptism. It is also one of the greatest privileges.

Every time we celebrate baptism, I think about the honor and privilege of it —the honor and privilege in adult baptism to be part of a very important

public declaration of faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. I think about them: The Muslim who wanted to be a Christian and couldn't find a church that would baptize him until he found this one. The young woman, urban professional, sophisticated, kneeling, with tears running down her cheeks. The successful businessman, newly remarried, determined to build a new life and legacy here, on his knees, in front of the baptismal font.

And I think always—more and more recently—about a wonderful character in the Bible, Simeon. Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for the rite of purification and dedication. They were met there by an elderly man, Simeon, who took the infant in his arms and said,

> Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
> for my eyes have seen your salvation
> which you have prepared for all people.

There is a sense in which the minister, in baptism, gets to hold the future in his or her arms, as old Simeon did, while saying the words, "You are a child of God, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." And then to walk the child into the midst of the congregation, and we all hold him or her for a moment or two.

It is such a wonderfully human moment. Parents are nervous, hoping their baby won't do something embarrassing. And with consistency the babies do just that: cry, scream, reach for parents who are abandoning them to this strange man dressed in black, some burp, throw up, load their diapers loudly at an inappropriate moment, some settle in and look at the minister beatifically and smile, others grab noses, glasses, Geneva tabs, and, of course, the microphone. Others are mesmerized by the bright chancel lights, the colorful banners. Some look out at the church like royalty greeting subjects from the balcony of the palace. I have baptized 2,100 infants over the past forty-eight years.

My favorites have screamed, "No, no!" wriggling desperately in my arms, and one, after I said "You belong to Jesus Christ forever," announced into the microphone "Uh-oh!"—appropriately, I thought.

And every time I am deeply moved to be like Simeon, holding in my arms the hope and the future of the church and world and affirming the good news of the gospel that God loves each of us quite apart from anything we have done or failed to do and that, in spite of whatever happens to us, we belong to Jesus Christ forever. And every time we pray to be reminded of our own baptism, I remember that my parents brought me one time, seventy-three years ago, for my baptism.

I am reminded of the ongoing rhythm of the church that is bigger than any one of us. And my hope is that you, who have been so faithful, will continue to give the life and mission and witness of this church your very best in the important days ahead.

> Be present when the community gathers to worship.
> Be generous with your financial support.
> Pray for the staff and officers and the Pastor Nominating Committee.
> And be here when the babies are baptized—and you hold in your arms the future.

Remind us, O God, of your amazing grace that enfolds our little ones,
our old ones, all of us. Now silence in us any voice but yours
and startle us with your truth that has come among us,
been born among us, in the child of Bethlehem,
Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

One of my favorite books recently is *Life among the Lutherans* by Garrison Keillor. It's a collection of his monologues from *Prairie Home Companion,* his weekly public radio show, that have to do with the Lutherans of his fictional town, Lake Wobegon. I like *Life among the Lutherans* because many of the guiding thinkers in my life have been Lutherans—Professor Joseph Sittler, Martin Marty. But even more importantly, I married a Lutheran a long time ago, and it is not entirely clear that she has ever left the one true church for Presbyterianism. One of the chapters in the book is "The True Meaning of Christmas," and in it Keillor speculates that

> of all the characters in the Christmas story, the wise men are probably not Jewish but Gentiles, and conceivably Lutheran. We think they may have been Lutherans because they brought gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Myrrh is a sort of casserole made from macaroni and hamburger —you bring it in a covered dish. Thus the speculation that at least one of the wise men might have been one of our guys. Maybe he was going to stop at the department store and get something expensive like gold or frankincense, but his wife, a wise woman, said, "Here, take this myrrh. They'll be hungry. And make sure you bring back the dish." (*Life among the Lutherans,* p. 56)

They are, by far, the most exotic characters in the Christmas story. They are favorites in the children's Christmas pageant because of the creative costume possibilities: long elaborate robes, crowns, their camels, and, of

course, their curious gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Ancient Christian tradition is that they arrived in Bethlehem twelve days after the child was born. The day is called Epiphany; its symbol is the star they followed. In many places in the Christian world and in Orthodox churches, Epiphany is celebrated more thoroughly than Christmas. Gifts are given and received, remembering the gifts of the magi.

Two eloquent friends, Barbara Brown Taylor and the late William Placher, warn about trivializing, sentimentalizing what is an important Christian story, one that will become stunningly tragic before it is over.

They came from the East. That would be Persia (modern Iran) or Babylon (modern Iraq) or Arabia (Saudi Arabia), names of nations that resonate. We just brought American troops home from one, are engaged in an escalating war of words with the second, and are dependent on the third for much of the oil we consume. “Wise men” is a very loose and not very helpful translation of magi: mysterious, priestly astrologers who observed and recorded the movements of the stars and who were widely believed to have secret knowledge based on their scholarship. Kings and powerful people often consulted with magi, seeking their advice and knowledge. They were not kings, although the gifts they brought indicate a familiarity with wealth and royalty. There were three gifts, but there may have been two or twenty magi. They saw something in the western sky, a new star, a close configuration of planets, something that signaled them that a new king had been born. And so they decided to investigate, to find the royal infant and pay homage to him.

So they headed west, following the star, heading for the logical place in the west for a royal king to be born, the royal palace in Jerusalem, where the reigning king was Herod, called the Great.

He was a Jewish king, the King of the Jews. Rome allowed him to remain in power and to rule so long as he collected Rome’s taxes and understood who, ultimately, was in charge. He was a builder. When you visit the Holy Land, you see the remains of Herod’s palaces and fortresses—Masada, for one. He was also, one biblical scholar says, one of history’s “most hysterical megalomaniacs.” He was incredibly cruel, particularly when it came to anyone or anything he regarded as a threat to his own authority and position. He ordered the execution of two of his own children. He arranged for the execution of prominent citizens in every town on the occasion of his own death so that there would be appropriate mourning throughout the land. Back in Rome, Caesar was said to have remarked that he would rather be Herod’s pig than his son.

His informers tell him of the approaching magi, and he grants them an audience. They have come to welcome and worship a new king, they tell the

current king, and they assume that the new king is here, in the nursery in the royal palace, Herod's new son. But there is no newborn in the palace. Herod's paranoia is stimulated. He calls in his own advisors and consultants and asks, "Say the long-promised messiah, the true king, was born. Where would it be?" His advisors know the Bible. "Why, it's in Bethlehem, not far from here actually, Bethlehem of Judea, David's birthplace. That's what the Bible says." So Herod brings the magi back, tells them what the Hebrew prophet Micah predicted, sends them down the road to Bethlehem, and asks them to stop again on their way home and tell him where the baby is, so that he, the current king, can go and bow before his replacement.

Well, the magi were indeed wise, because they saw through that. They find the child and his mother and father, present their gifts, and head back home, but by a different route. They trick Herod, and when he discovers what has happened, he flies into a typical rage and in one of the most brutal incidents in the Bible—one that is almost never mentioned in our retelling of the Christmas story and certainly never makes it into Christmas cards—Herod orders his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and to assure that they eliminate this new king, kill all the infants and children in Bethlehem under the age of two. How many? Someone has calculated the approximate size of Bethlehem and suggested that the number was about twenty. One infant would have been too many. There is great weeping, an oppressed people's tragic sadness at their helplessness before brute force, the arbitrary violence, the weeping down through history right up to the present, the weeping of Palestinian mothers whose children are killed by Israeli troops, or of Israeli mothers whose children are killed in a suicide bombing in a pizza shop.

Joseph and Mary, in the meantime, have fled to Egypt, where Jesus begins his life, as a refugee, far from home, an immigrant. When Herod dies, maybe a year or two later, the family moves again, all the way north, on past Jerusalem, north to Nazareth, where the story began with their engagement and that mysterious angel.

The magi are outsiders, aliens, non-Jews in a very Jewish story. Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. But here, at the outset, he introduces Jesus by telling about Gentiles—Arabs, in fact—at the manger. It's a story that shatters religious tradition and rules and mores and customs and brings outsiders inside. Think about that. I cannot imagine a more urgent challenge in the church, in the nation, in the world, than intercultural, interfaith understanding. In a world where the three Abrahamic faiths in particular—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—are often cast as enemies and often, tragically, act like enemies—Islamic extremists bombing churches in Egypt and Iraq and targeting Jews; Jewish extremists bombing mosques and hurling rocks at Palestinian school children; and American Islamphobia—it is stunning to realize that here, in this very Jewish story that will become

the first and foundational Christian story, the first visitation, the first witnesses are Arabic.

Before the story is over, Jesus will shatter all the boundaries of race and social class and status and gender and religious morality. Why would we think he would not also shatter deeply engrained boundaries of sexual orientation as well? Before this story is over, all the outsiders, the marginal, the poor, the sinners, the unclean, the tax collectors, prostitutes and lepers, women and children, foreigners, Roman centurions, outsiders, all of them, will be welcomed to his company, and to his table.

Before it's over, Jesus will scandalize the most deeply pious and devout religious leaders of his day, the most orthodox and moral, with his radical inclusivity. He still does. For those who would hear and see, he taught that "there are things more important than the religious traditions and paraphernalia and liturgy and the doctrines you have developed over the centuries and that have become precious to you, too precious, so precious that you cannot and will not see how desperately I love these ones you have cast out."

In Cardinal George's apology for comparing the gay rights movement to the Ku Klux Klan, he said that Christian faith teaches respect for all people. And then the Cardinal asked, "The question is: does respect mean we have to change our teaching? . . . That's an ongoing discussion, of course." Well yes, that's exactly what respect means, and that is exactly what Jesus has done over and over down through history. Inspired by his love, the church changed its mind about its traditions and teaching—about race, for instance, about the role of women.

Jesus' radical inclusivity threatened and still threatens all who are invested in exclusivity. Jesus doesn't understand that one of the sociological and anthropological functions of religion is to define the tribe, who belongs and who does not, to draw lines between "us" and "them"—saved and unsaved, Catholic and Protestant, liberal and evangelical—to build boundary walls of doctrine to keep them out and us pure. Jesus doesn't understand that at all —why we insist on investing our energy on keeping people away from his table, outside his company. Jesus tore down the walls, crossed all the boundaries, Jesus opens the doors and welcomes everyone who will come to him, and he will die with his arms outstretched to embrace the whole world.

When the nagi saw the child, they had to change their plans and return home by a different route. I imagine those old scholars thought they had seen everything there is to see and had their opinions about what is true neatly in place and what is possible all neatly in place. I imagine that they, like everyone else, assumed that power and authority reside in the king's palace, in politics and military might. I imagine they assumed that truth

resides in books and philosophic erudition. And I like to imagine that when they saw the child to whom they had been led, everything changed for them.

“We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,” T.S. Eliot wrote about them, “But no longer at ease here” (“Journey of the Magi”).

Now they knew that real power and real authority is in vulnerable love; that the reality of God, the Almighty Creator of all that is, is here in this child; that truth about God and all truth is here, lying in the manger.

And one thing further: even though Matthew doesn’t mention it, I believe their faces were shining after they saw the child. That’s what the Bible says happens when you see God: your face shines. “Arise, shine, for your light has come,” the prophet wrote centuries before.

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, from his encounter with God, his face was shining and everybody was afraid of him.

Your face shines when you see God.

There is a great moment—I think it’s my very favorite moment, if I may be personal for a moment—on Christmas Eve. It is when, at the end of the candlelight services, the people of the congregation light little candles and pass the light from person to person, pew to pew. The clergy get to see it, all of it, as the darkened sanctuary slowly fills with the light of a thousand candles. We’re singing “Silent Night, Holy Night,” and it is a good thing I know the words because I can’t keep my eyes off the beautiful sight, and besides, there are tears in my eyes. Each face, young and old and in between, people I know and love, and people I do not know, people whose children I have baptized, whose young I have married and whose dear ones I have memorialized, strangers, guests—and at that moment, each face illumined by the light of a candle, each face shining.

It is a sight I will not forget ever. And I dare to believe that faces are shining, yours and mine, because on that night—but not only on that night but also in the daily experience of life together in this community, worshiping, singing, studying, eating, serving meals, tutoring youngsters, giving, building—we have seen God, you and I have, and nothing will ever be the same for us.

Amen.